

Sex Workers' Opera - The Art of Listening

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Siobhan Knox and Alex Etchart are the co-directors and facilitators of the award-winning, repeat-sell-out show the Sex Workers' Opera. In this article they will introduce the project, share their working methods and reflect on the successes and challenges of the workshops and performances in January 2015 at the Arcola Theatre. Breaking stigma and stereotypes, the *Sex Workers' Opera* is a multimedia production written and performed by a group of Sex Workers and friends, drawing on members' experiences and stories collected from around the world. It features theatre, music spanning opera to hip-hopera, sound art, projections, dance and poetry in a mosaic of experiences woven together by the story thread of a personal clash between an anti-sex-work campaigning mother and her sex working daughter.

Why Make an Opera?

Everyone has an opinion on sex work, but rarely do they listen to workers themselves. Opera and film have a long history of predominantly rich white male directors representing Sex Workers as either glamorous or harrowed women, which plays into stigma which ultimately leads to marginalisation and violence. We feel art has a moral responsibility to represent people on their own terms, in their own words i.e. by listening to and including Sex Workers first and foremost - as Amnesty International has recently joined us in doing.

In this article we are not going to address the ins and outs of sex work politics. It is famously a complex and controversial realm, and there are plenty of Sex Worker-led organisations with extensive online resources through which you can do your own research. Just for some initial context: in the UK it is currently illegal for two consenting freelance Sex Workers to live/work from the same flat for safety. In countries where sex work is illegal the trade is pushed underground which inevitably leads to less safety, more risks, more exploitation and less violence being reported to the police.

In a world where Sex Workers are so often spoken for, we thought it vital to create a Sex-Worker-led production, the methodology of which we'll present later on. We are part of a wider movement that has been working tirelessly for years to bring the sex work narrative away from the sensationalising moralistic misrepresentations that Sex Workers endure on a day-to-day basis in mainstream art and media.

The First Show

The project began after 7 months of on the ground research, consulting with local and global grassroots groups and collecting over 100 anonymised stories. Once we had built trust with key groups, we put a callout for participants on escort websites, internet forums, at Sex Worker community meetings, on email lists, and ran a successful but modest Kickstarter crowdfund campaign. We told everyone the cast, crew and mini-orchestra would be minimum 50% Sex Workers at all times and all allies would be vouched-for by a Sex Worker. This is to ensure Sex Workers can participate on-stage and off-stage without automatically outing themselves to their parents, employers etc. In May 2014, a group of 20 people came together for three days of workshops to bond, create and rehearse a 1hr15m show. In an extraordinary burst of daring and creativity, a group of strangers met on the Monday morning and were performing that Wednesday and Thursday night to a packed audience at the Courtyard Theatre in Hoxton, London to rapturous applause. The show was critically acclaimed by mainstream press such as Classic FM and The Independent and Sex Worker activists like Pandora Blake alike.

The Sequel

The community group became strongly bonded and grew, going on to perform excerpts at diverse events and win an award as a Pioneer in the Sexual Freedom Awards. Following a tantalising Christmas

fundraiser event featuring prominent queer and drag performers such as Meth and Rubyyy Jones from Familyyy Fierce, the team grew to 24 members for a week of development workshops at the Arcola Theatre and a 5 day run extended due to overwhelming demand.

The new show was 2 hours long, featured an expanded 4 person mini-orchestra, and sold out three weeks in advance - receiving television and international press including BBC Radio World Service and London Live. This second more developed show went into a lot more depth about Sex Workers' everyday experiences, including a balance of humour and empowerment as well as struggle and pains related to police violence and isolation from friends/family. We had the space to address the more nuanced corners of Sex Work politics and share reflections on how exploitation is universal throughout capitalism, not just in one small sector of the Sex Industry.

Now we will discuss our methods as a theatre company that gave the project its successes and acknowledge the challenges we faced. Then, drawing on our participant feedback and audience/media responses, we will reflect on how we can develop further as a project, theatre company, and in our movements for social justice.

Workshop Methods (in No Particular Order)

To make such daring feats possible with such modest time and resources, Siobhan and Alex rely on a few core practices to ensure a consistency of safe and effective working spaces for sharing challenging experiences, developing meaningful art from these, and enjoying rehearsal processes without caving in to typical theatre stresses that can fragment community groups.

Tuning

Before any group session, be it Siobhan and Alex project managing, the crew starting the days jobs or all 24 members beginning an in-depth rehearsal, we zone in by sharing each others' emotional states through a three-step process we call 'tuning'. Adapted from nature-connection circles, this makes people feel listened-to, aware of each other's' wider-life-journeys and by extension minimises misunderstanding/drama in high pressured creative environments. For example: Shelley had a fight with her girlfriend that morning, Khalid doesn't realise that when she doesn't seem that friendly it is because of her home challenges, and he is hurt, setting a rehearsal off to a bad start. By tuning, Shelley becomes more conscious, thus in control of a stress on her, and Khalid is able to factor that in when reading Shelley's intentions and support her better. People's initial reaction is often 'do we have time for this when there is so much to rehearse?' but members have often reflected how this initial grounding saves time and energy in the long run.

Inner-Child Reconnection

Leading on from this, before any artistic development as a group, we run an intense session of inner-child reconnection, by which we mean an exploration of play, creativity, clowning, dark clowning, trust building and heart sharing. This is as much through words as through physicality, because building connectivity through shared experience comes as much from sharing bodily moments as mental ones. Theatre practitioners will be familiar with warm-ups and games, but we would suggest that we take this further - using tools from our experience in the Rebel Clown Army where we used openness and vulnerability in violent situations with riot police as a method for diffusing antagonism and building bridges of communication. In our dominant culture, vulnerability is often bullied out of adulthood demanding the death of the inner child - including outward curiosity and fear. Feeling safe in sharing vulnerability will be vital later in our process where members will create scenes with each other based on often deep or dark experiences they have not necessarily processed or shared before.

Safer Spaces Agreement

As these moments inevitably bring up challenging parts of ourselves and stories we share in confidence, it is vital that we create a safer spaces agreement - the traditional premises of which include 'no racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, whorephobia, whorearchy, ableism or ageism' and can expand to cover much more. While many effective Safer Spaces Policy templates exist in activist circles

we believe it is vital that we create it together so that it reflects each person's needs and people have a sense of ownership thus responsibility over it. However, where we differ from some spaces is that, in our focus for inclusivity we recognise that we are all learning and all make mistakes, and so recommend that in the first instance our members hear something problematic, they 'call in' rather than 'call out' the behaviour. E.g. a member uses a transphobic word without realising it's offensive, a member of the group trusts their intentions and explains why that language has caused hurt, encouraging them to avoid it in future without stigmatising their ignorance which could have all kinds of socio-cultural factors. Of course the oppressor's emotions shouldn't be the priority in such a situation but, in spaces where many of us experience multiple intersecting and complex oppressions, singling out, shouting, accusing and excluding often closes ears rather than opening them. If the ultimate goal is to develop as individuals and as a group, creating listening-learning spaces is key.

The Personal is Political

As a community arts project we are process-oriented. This means that the experience of the group - building a community, learning from each other through sharing vulnerability and developing new music and theatre skills - is as important as putting on a good show for an unknown audience to challenge preconceptions and shift the social narrative. Some of our members were already highly active in the Sex Work community, but as Sex Work is so stigmatised, for some of our members it was the first time sitting with a group of peers discussing their experiences without judgement, as they had never come out to family or friends let alone met other workers before. This made our job just as much about nurturing a community and providing access to wider support networks as it was about bringing marginalised voices to a broader platform. By sharing personal experiences, reading through stories sent in from around the world, and Skyping a group of Sex Workers in Chile, we generated awareness of how all our personal struggles - including wider ones about class, sexuality, gender and race - interrelate. Empowerment is sought equally through support and solidarity within the group process as it sought through transforming the opinions of an unknown audience. By extension, in practice the person telling/singing/dancing the story/scene on stage often wasn't the person who experienced it, which allowed for stories from around the world to be told to a London audience with a personal connection whilst preserving anonymity.

Rotational Responsibility

At the same time as sharing stories, we also share artistic vision and direction. Among our group are choreographers, singers, theatre directors, activists and more. While not everyone has formal training or experience, a correlation among our Sex Worker members is a propensity for improvisation and learning fast on the job. This means we can rotate who is leading training sessions and the development of certain scenes, which creates communal ownership and diversifies the artistic results. At the same time, because many of our processes involve dealing with intense emotions, at all times we have a member of the group separate to the facilitator who is looking out for people in distress and ready to sit aside and support anyone if they need it or pause a session if the whole group needs to. This ensures the facilitator can focus on immersing the current process and participants feel safe and able to self-care without compromising the process for everyone else.

Reflections

Audience Reactions

There is often a dichotomy presumed between community theatre and professional theatre, the former invoking ideas of inclusivity, empowerment, amateur quality - heart warming to watch but not artistically impressive – and only the latter capable of artistic excellence and impact. We are under no illusions that the popularity of the show was in part due to the public fascination with anything with the word “sex” in the title, especially “sex worker”, due to controversy surrounding “the oldest profession”, and the shock factor of brashly associating a ‘dirty’ profession with the ‘elevated’ institution of Opera. However we set out to “shatter [these] expectations” (VICE) with West End worthy show tunes, a compelling narrative, professional choreography, projected ventriloquist shows from a web cam model half way across the world, and immersive interventions in the audience. One of the repeat comments we heard in person, on social media and via email was “This is what theatre should be” particularly in reference to the raw, personal storytelling moments throughout the show. We discovered that people are tired of slick, over-rehearsed, out of touch scripts/performances and hunger for the raw and vulnerable. By using theatre reportage techniques from Teatro di Nascosto in Italy, we curated spaces where non-actors could emotionally and honestly share real stories - eg. whispering into audience members ears - achieving connectivity while not compromising on quality through forced drama.

Press and Activism

What surprised us was the respect and free reign media companies gave to us in articles and interviews. We had prepared to have to fight our corner to be taken seriously as we are aware how often sex worker activist and groups are ignored, edited in a biased way, or pitted against an anti sex work speaker - often religious radicals or ignorant celebrities/politicians with no experience themselves. Something we discovered was that because we present as an “arts project” and not an explicit political campaign, arts and culture reporters with no specific political agenda ask us the open ended question “What is your art about?” This gives us the space to speak freely of the political context without being automatically attacked or silenced. As a result, within our first few months we had already received quite high profile and unproblematic press where unfortunately other sex work campaigns have had to fight for years and often get to a point where they stop trusting the press. This illustrates the power of art as a form of activism, in particular where many people’s only understanding of hidden groups comes from popular culture too often laced with prejudice. Many battles are not fought in the mainstream media and our project would not have been possible without the blood and sweat of years of people struggling before us and alongside us. What gives the Opera great potential is that the theatre is a place where people go to have fantastical ideas presented to them and often to be challenged. Access to bigger venues, bigger audiences, television and radio creates the possibility of transmitting radical and complex ideas to wide and diverse audiences in an accessible, sing-along fashion.

The Opera is undergoing a research & development phase at present with a music video expected in spring 2016 and a new run of the show by next Summer. Siobhan and Alex’ umbrella theatre company is called XX - Experimental Experience and runs monthly happenings on the first Thursday of the month, offers creative action workshops to grassroots campaigns and performs regular performance art at events.

www.experimentalexperience.com
www.sexworkersopera.com



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